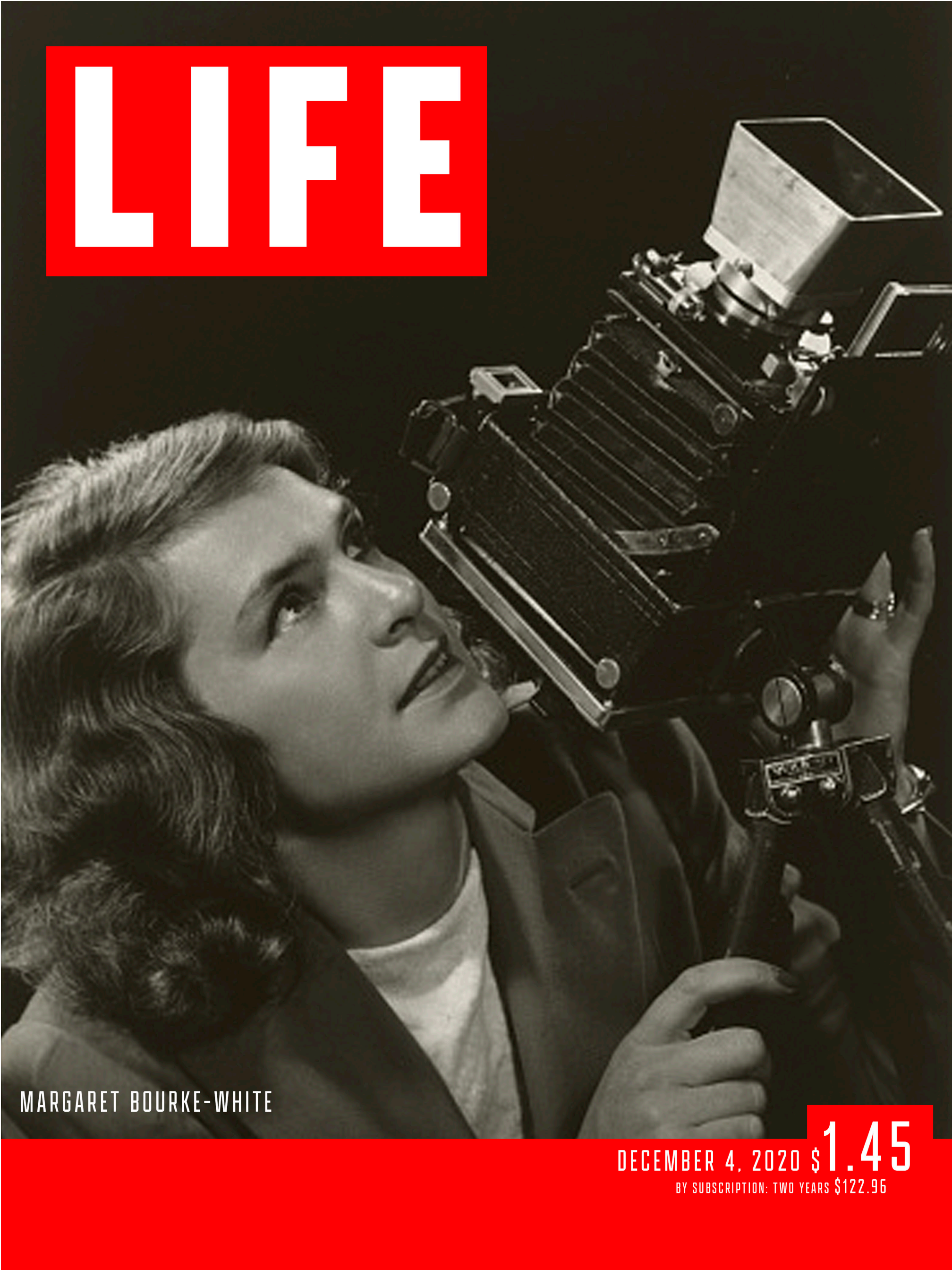


# LIFE



MARGARET BOURKE-WHITE

DECEMBER 4, 2020 \$1.45  
BY SUBSCRIPTION: TWO YEARS \$122.96



# A WOMAN OF MANY FIRSTS:

## A BREAKTHROUGH AND IMPACTFUL CAREER

### Introduction

The first foreign photographer granted access to document the Soviet industry in the 1930’s. The first female staff photographer for Life magazine. The first woman to photograph in the combat zones of World War II. Within her professional life, Margaret Bourke-White was a woman of many firsts and a trail blazer within the photojournalism community.

She broke down many barriers for women and photographers alike. Many saw the world through her lens, from domestic issues such as the Dust Bowl of 1934 to the foreign horrors of the Holocaust. Throughout her career, Bourke-White committed herself to her craft.

### Formative Years

Margaret Bourke-White was born on June 14, 1904 to parents Minnie Bourke and Joseph White, then known as Margaret or Maggie White. She would later change her name to a hyphenated version of her mother’s maiden name and her family name, thus the household name that the world came to know.

When she was as young girl, Bourke-White was exposed to the world of photography through her father, Joseph White, who had a fascination with optics. He tinkered with lenses and like devices, attempting to make exposure settings easier for amateurs. Joseph would take his daughter with him when he would go photograph and she would help him develop the images in the family bathtub.

Ironically, Bourke-White hardly touched or used a camera until her father’s passing in 1922. As she notes in her autobiography, “it is odd that photography was never one of my childhood hobbies when Father was so fond of it”.

Her father also liked to bond with his children through the outdoors. He taught her the names of the stars and how to recognize harmless snakes from venomous ones. This would influence her interest in herpetology, the study of reptiles and amphibians, which she studied in college.



**Rising Star:** Anonymous  
A 1928 publicity photo of Bourke-White posing with her Graflex camera .

Bourke-White began her college career at Columbia University in the fall of 1921 in New York City. Her second semester there, she registered for a photography class with Clarence H. White, founding member of the Photo-Secession photography movement, and fell in love with photography. When her father passed in January of 1922, Bourke-White’s mother was able to provide her with a second-hand camera.

Bourke-White would continue her education at multiple different universities, including University of Michigan where she was studying herpetology. This is also where she met and married her first husband of two years.

After her first marriage ended, Bourke-White transferred to Cornell University for her senior year. While there, she photographed the grounds and buildings on the campus and sold them to fellow students and the Cornell Alumni News. In fact, her photographs were praised by multiple architects. After receiving a positive, unbiased opinion from an architect in New York City, Bourke-White finished out her degree in herpetology in 1927 at Cornell and made it her goal to eliminate the bias against allowing women inside steel mills. She traveled to Cleveland and began to photograph its industrial sites, including Otis Steel. The images that she captured of the steel-making process would become her ticket to her first stint as a photojournalist: the first staff photographer for Fortune magazine.

Bourke-White’s images caught the eye of Henry Luce, founder of Time magazine and Fortune magazine, which was geared towards businessmen. Luce’s vision was to display the drama and beauty of the steel making industry and make imagery part of the story, rather than complementary to it. In 1929, Luce sent a telegram to Bourke-White saying, “have just seen your steel photographs. Can you come to New York within a week at our expense?” Ironically, Bourke-White ignored the telegram for two days. In her autobiography she writes, “I very nearly did not [accept the offer]. The name of Luce meant nothing to me. Of course, I knew Time, which was then five years old. A trip to the public library to look through back files confirmed my impression that the only important use Time made of photographs was for the cover, where the portrait of some political personage appeared each week. I was not the least bit interested in photographing personages”. Then Bourke-White thought to herself, ‘why turn down a free trip to New York? If it doesn’t work out, I can take the opportunity to connect with big architects’.

Luckily, it did work out and Bourke-White accepted Luce’s offer to become his first staff photographer for Fortune magazine, launching her into her remarkable, breakthrough career.



**Macabre Mountains:** Margaret Bourke-White  
A row of dead pigs, heads downward, at Swift meat packing Packington Plant, 1930.

### Rising Professional Career

Bourke-White’s photographs appeared in Fortune’s debut issue in February of 1930. The images depicted different aspects of a meat packing company, Swift & Company. They were paired with an accompanying article written by Fortune’s first managing editor, Parker Lloyd-Smith. The article titled ‘Tsaa-a Tsaa-a Tsaa-a’ was about Swift & Company. According to a recent Fortune article, Bourke-White wrote that “countless times we had heard the well-worn adage that the Swifts used all the pig but the squeal. The sight that faced us proved it. Before us were pungent macabre mountains—rich tones of ochre in the yellow light—mountains of the finest pig dust.... Parker Lloyd-Smith took one sniff, bolted for the car and put up the windows tight while I took photographs. He had a long wait, for the yellow light had low actinic value and I had to make time exposures. When it was over, I left my camera cloth and light cords behind to be burned.” This assignment is worth noting, as some



**Everything but the Squeal:** Margaret Bourke-White  
A knife wielding butcher about to cut up a dead pig at Swift meat packing Packington Plant, 1930.

attribute it to the advent and popularization of the photo essay.

### “The Country of the Day After Tomorrow” – Documenting the USSR

Throughout her time with Fortune, Bourke-White covered many assignments, though one of the most notable was her coverage of the Soviet Union between 1930 and 1932. Within this time period, Fortune sent Bourke-White to the Soviet Union a total of three times to collect coverage of the industrial revolution that was occurring during Joseph Stalin’s Five-Year Plan to rapidly industrialize the Soviet economy. At the beginning, Bourke-White’s approach to covering the mystery of Russia was neutral and nontechnical. In her autobiography, she describes politics as “colorless beside the drama of the machine”. Though, she continued on to write that “it was only much later that I discovered that politics could be an ab-

sorbing subject, with a profound effect on human destiny”.

Bourke-White writes in her autobiography that she “felt the story of a nation trying to industrialize almost overnight was just cut out” for her. The mystery of Russia and the restricted access for photographers is what drew her in. She writes that “nothing attracts me like a closed door. I cannot let my camera rest until I have pried it open, and I wanted to be first”.

Bourke-White photographed the Soviet industry and its people extensively. Her collection of images include processes of industrialization, infrastructure and most notably, people. According to a Time magazine article, “Bourke-White placed her human subject front and center” when it came to documenting the collectivization of agriculture. Collectivization was the other half of Stalin’s economic policy (the first being the Five-Year Plan) and it consisted of the forced nationalization of agriculturally productive land. She documented the suffering that occurred as result of the non-negotiable policies.



If one were to look through Bourke-White’s Soviet images, they’d find that majority of them are made up of faces and expressions that tell countless stories. A significant example of this is an image of a Russian woman clutching a slab of meat while surrounded by other peasant women. In the Time article, this image is described as signaling to the viewer that “the winter of 1930 was not a kind one”. This image communicates that the rapid industrialization of the Soviet Union left many of its citizens in the dust to fend for themselves. Many other people photographed by Bourke-White seemed to communicate similar sentiments purely through their appearances and expressions.

It’s worth noting that because of her involvement in documenting the USSR, Bourke-White was cited by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) 13 times for “associating with groups that espoused foreign ideologies or produced unamerican propaganda” during the Red Scare. The Red Scare, or better known as McCarthyism, “was the hysteria over the perceived threat posed by Communists in the U.S. during the

Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States, which intensified in the late 1940’s and early 1950’s”, according to History.com. Though there doesn’t seem to be anything official recorded, it can be speculated that Bourke-White’s depiction of Soviet citizens as human beings rather than the creatures of mystery and potential danger that McCarthyism made them out to be, may have contributed to her handful of HUAC citations. The HUAC may have thought that Bourke-White was on the Soviet’s side because of her humanistic approach to the people. According to The Charnel-House, “a statement reaffirming her belief in democracy and her opposition to dictatorship of the left or of the right, enabled her to avoid being cross-examined by the committee”.

Another notable assignment that Bourke-White covered while working for Fortune was the American Dust Bowl of 1934. Described as a “plague upon the

land”, the Dust Bowl was “a horror of the middle part of the last century, and the result of a destructive mix of brutal weather and uninformed agricultural practices that left farmland vulnerable”.

Bourke-White notes in her autobiography that covering the aftermath of the droughts and storms “left a very deep impression” on her. She writes, “I was deeply moved by the suffering I saw and touched, particularly by the bewilderment of the farmers”.

Her images depict the landscapes of barren lands ravaged by drought as well as grief-stricken families that had just lost their livelihoods. Though she documented both environments and people, Bourke-White writes in her autobiography that seeing the drought’s effect on the people “was the beginning of my awareness in a human, sympathetic sense as subjects for the camera and photographed against a wider canvas than I have perceived before”.

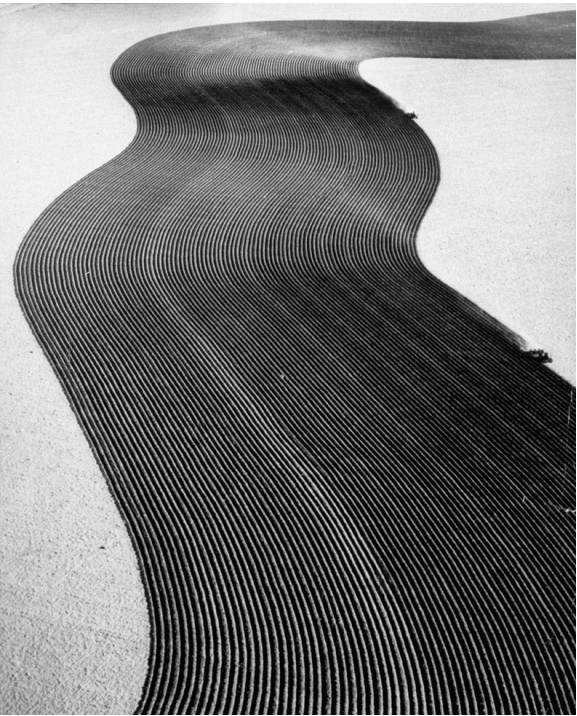
“Nothing attracts me like a closed door. I cannot let my camera rest until I have pried it open, and I wanted to be first.”

-Margaret Bourke-White

An Unkind Winter:

A Russian woman grimly holds a slab of meat as other peasant women staunchly stand by in Sibera in 1930.

Margaret Bourke-White



Deep Impressions: Margaret Bourke-White  
A protective pattern was spread across a farm near Walsh, Co. by a farmer using two tractors, 1954.



The Force of Nature: Margaret Bourke-White  
A farm house that was damaged by a dust storm, Colorado, 1954.

Many of Bourke-White’s images of the decimated landscapes are hauntingly entrancing, especially ones that take on aerial perspectives that depict patterned gouges in the barren land. Other impactful images include photos of dead livestock, annihilated buildings and families in despair.

Life at LIFE

Shattering another glass ceiling, Bourke-White became the first female staff photographer for the photographically based magazine, Life. In 1936, Henry Luce offered Bourke-White a full-time position as a staff photographer for his new magazine, Life. As history reflects, she



Looking to the Future: Margaret Bourke-White  
A Colorado farming family during the 1954 Dust Bowl.

accepted the position and remained with the popular photo magazine for the rest of her career.

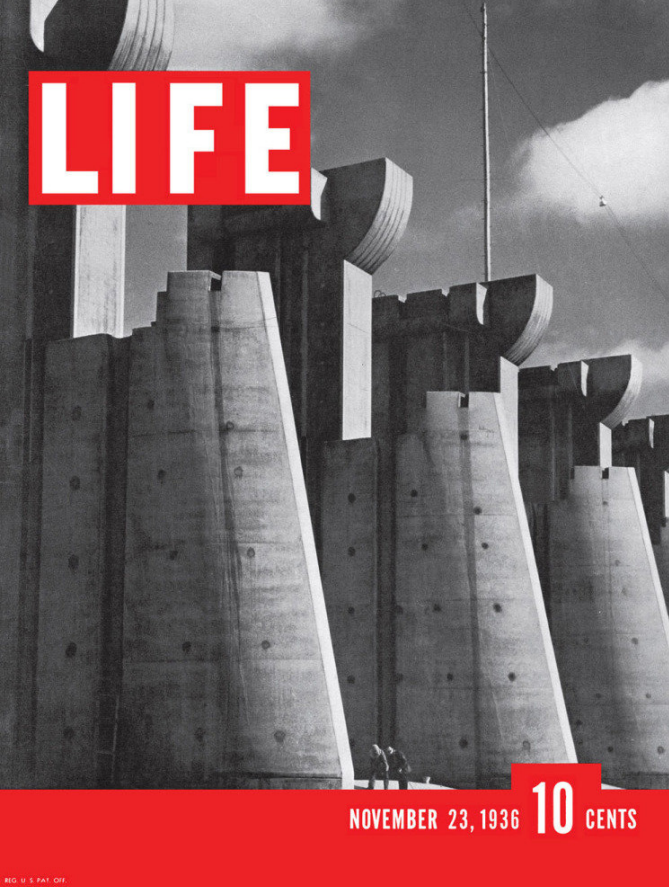
The debut issue of Life was released on November 23, 1936, graced with Bourke-White’s infamous image of Montana’s Fort Peck Dam on the front cover. According to Prints and Photographs Reading Room, the first issue “sold out in hours, and in four months, circulation had gone from 380,000 to more than one million a week”.

Bourke-White covered many assignments for Life, though, as with Fortune, there are defining assignments that she covered worth noting that resulted in some of her most infamous images.

To start off, her coverage of the

1937 Louisville flood resulted in an image that is every bit ironic as it is disheartening. The resulting infamous image, titled The Louisville Flood, depicts people waiting in a relief line to get supplies after their town was destroyed by a flood with a giant poster behind them on a wall stating, “world’s highest standard of living, there’s no way like the American way”. Though this photograph has aged 83 years, it hasn’t seemed to lose any of its irony to this day. This could be a possible reason why it’s retained its infamy.





The cover of *Life*'s debut issue from November 1936, graced with Bourke-White's photo of Montana's Fort Peck Dam.

No Longer Just a Man's Game:

Bourke-White's favorite self-portrait, made with the U.S. 8th Air Force after being accredited with the U.S. military, 1943.

Margaret Bourke-White



No Way like the American Way:

Residents of Louisville, Ky stand in a relief line to collect supplies after a massive flood destroyed their town, 1937.

Margaret Bourke-White

World War II  
and the Liberation  
of Buchenwald

Arguably her most notable coverage is of the combat zones of World War II and her images of the liberation of the Nazi concentration camp, Buchenwald, in April of 1945. Yet another first, Bourke-White was the first female war correspondent to be accredited by the United States military in 1942, specifically the Air Force. According to Prints and Photographs Reading Room, “the deal LIFE Magazine negotiated with the Pentagon gave the magazine and the Air Force rights to any photographs she [Bourke-White] made”.

Bourke-White's writes in her autobiography that when she and General Patton's Third Army reached the Buchenwald concentration camp on the outskirts of Weimar, Germany, there was “no time to think about it or interpret it. Just rush to photograph it; write it; cable it”. She continues on, writing that “Patton was so incensed at what he saw that he ordered his police to get a thousand civilians to make them see with their own eyes what their leaders had done. The MPs were so enraged that they brought back two thousand. This was the first I heard the words I was to hear repeated thousands of times: ‘We didn't know, we didn't know.’ But they did know.”

The images that resulted from her coverage are graphic, evocative, painful and all too real. She writes that “using the camera was almost a relief. It interposed a slight barrier between myself and the horror in front of me”. Bourke-White photographed “piles of naked, lifeless bodies, the human skeletons in the furnaces, the living skeletons who would die the next day because they had had to wait too long for deliverance”.

Her image titled ‘The Living Dead at Buchenwald’ is considered her most iconic image of the liberation of the concentration camp. The photograph depicts survivors staring out at the Allied rescuers there to deliver them from their torment. Though this image is one of the most well-known, it wasn't officially published by Life until 15 years later in 1960 in a special anniversary issue. A photo essay containing many of Bourke-White's other photographs from the liberation were published in the May seventh, 1945 issue. Quite a few of those photos are very graphic and haunting to look at; charred bodies from being burned alive, lifeless bodies piled on top of each other like expired livestock and living skeletons on the brink of death.

Bourke-White's coverage of this historical event created a lasting record of the atrocities committed by the Nazi regime, making it so that it can never be forgotten. The impact of her images from Buchenwald had a tremendous impact on the viewing public, as they mainly got their news from sources such as Life magazine. Life plainly laid out the harsh reality of why the United States got involved in the war to begin with.

“We didn't know, we didn't know”:

**Top right:** German civilians are forced by American troops to bear witness to Nazi atrocities at Buchenwald concentration camp, 1945.

**Middle right:** Survivors look at Bourke-White and rescuers from the United States Third Army during the liberation of Buchenwald, 1945.

**Bottom left:** The remains of an incinerated prisoner inside a Buchenwald cremation oven, 1945.

**Bottom right:** A Buchenwald prisoner, deformed by malnutrition, leans against his bunk after trying to walk, 1945.



Margaret Bourke-White





## Lasting Impressions and Contributions to Photojournalism

As it has been reiterated throughout this writing, Margaret Bourke-White's career was monumental and significant for photographers and women alike in the early twentieth century. Before and even during Bourke-White's career, photojournalism was a very male-dominated field, especially in the areas that Bourke-White wanted to cover.

From the beginning, Bourke-White was determined to shatter the gender biases that were in place across a span of areas. This is reflected through her rock-hard determination to be able to photograph inside steel mills, which at the time, were off limits to women. Despite the system being against her, she succeeded and produced the photographs that got her noticed by Henry Luce. She continued to challenge gender biases by entering the definition of a man's game, battle fronts. Her accreditation by the United States military broke down yet another barrier that allowed her access into a gruesome reality that the world had never seen the likes of. As Ben Cosgrove puts it in a *Life* magazine article about the trailblazing photojournalist, "Bourke-White broke ground again and again throughout her career, notching notable assignments not only as the first woman photographer to accomplish this or that, but as the first photographer, period, to cover a variety of momentous events and key figures

(heroic and heinous)".

Cosgrove hits the nail on the head with his assertion that Bourke-White wasn't just a pioneer for women photographers but for photographers period. Before Bourke-White was granted access to photograph the Soviet Union, photographers had the door slammed in their faces. Bourke-White turned the knob and opened it.

Though Bourke-White led a great example for photographers in general, the path she carved out specifically for women can't be overstated. At a time when women weren't viewed as equals to men, let alone professionals, the weight of Bourke-White's ground-breaking career was immense. As Dina Modianot-Fox wrote for *Smithsonian Magazine*, Bourke-White "didn't just raise the glass ceiling; she shattered it and threw away the pieces". Bourke-White showed women that they didn't have to live within the standards that society thrust upon them. She showed them that courage and fearlessness wasn't something to shy away from.

Bourke-White's continual courage throughout her sometimes trying assignments can be attributed to a lesson that her parents stressed throughout her childhood: fearlessness. In her autobiography, she writes that, "learning to do things fearlessly was considered important by both my parents. Mother had begun when I was quite tiny to help me over my childish terrors, devising simple little games to teach me not to be afraid of the dark, encouraging me to enjoy being alone instead of dreading it, as so many children and some adults do".

Bourke-White is also referenced in the formation and popularization of the photo essay and contemporary photojournalism. *Life* was the first publication of its time, as it used text to illustrate photographs whereas majority of other publications used photographs to illustrate text. This focus on imagery telling the story rather than words brought about the idea of the photo essay and since Bourke-White was one the pioneering staff photographers for *Life*, she contributed to the now common-place procedure of photo essays.

According to Naomi Rosenblum in 'A History of Women Photographers', "Bourke-White popularized the vocation of photojournalism itself by writing several books that combined autobiography, commentary on topical issues, and photographs". Though journalism and photography were already established fields when she set out on her career, Bourke-White's success and notoriety showed that it was possible to make a career out of it, rather than having either of them act as side jobs.

Margaret Bourke-White's career was and still is an astounding feat. Despite all the blockades in her way, she was still able to flourish and make a name for herself. From her humble start photographing the architecture of a college campus to candidly documenting the barbarity of one of the worst events in human history, Bourke-White committed herself to her craft. Her journey consisted of many firsts and many groundbreaking precedents, historically establishing her as a formidable pioneer photojournalist.

### High Up:

Bourke-White makes a precarious photo from one of the eagles on the 61st floor of the Chrysler Building in New York City, 1934.

Oscar Graubner

